

Aria

A B S T R A C T A R T

K I R K V A R N E D O E O N A B S T R A C T A R T

The idea that you need to learn about abstract art to enjoy it strikes some primal nerve, arousing our anxiety about authentic versus fake experience. It offends the know-nothings, who fall back on: "I don't know art, but I know what I like." But this cliché flies in the face of our common sense awareness, reinforced a thousand times in our life, that some of the most deep-seated pleasures of our natural selves—from sex and food on up to music—involve appetites that had to be educated. If these pleasures are rooted in crude instinct, they nonetheless grow in depth and power as we acquire hierarchies of discrimination, until second nature is nowhere separable from the first. Yet visual art—and abstract art most particularly—remains one of the last bastions of unashamed, unrepentant ignorance, where educated experience can still be equated with phony experience. In regard to abstract art, this syn-

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

All art is quite useless.

— Oscar Wilde

drome becomes ever more acute as the tradition gets fatter and the works get leaner. What we see gets simpler, and what we can bring to it gets more complex. So we are constantly worried that we are being played for fools by works like Marden's painting. What makes the anxiety even worse is the fact that this is an art that, by its very nature, willfully and knowingly flirts with absurdity and emptiness, dancing on the knife edge of nonsense and beckoning us to come along.

Why put up with it? Because we want

Brice Marden, *I*, 1973.
Oil on wax on canvas, 182.9x274.6cm.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

what only this risk has been able to give us. Of course, what we want from many of the forms of our culture is comfort and continuity, a sense of connection to enduring traditions, a respite from the relentless clocks that drive our individual lives. But, in modern society, we also live with a sharply ambivalent, painfully keen awareness that our lives are irremediably different from those of the past. We rise each day to a particular mix of sharpened pleasures and deepened anxieties that quickens our sense of separation from other days—a century ago, a decade ago, two years ago. This arouses in many of us a hunger for a culture that affirms this sensation, by giving us new forms that give shape to our feelings, our moment in history—as distinct from the feelings of our forebears, even of our youth. We torment (and flatter) ourselves with the belief that it has not all been said, that life as we live it is more complex than has until now been articulated. And in order to allow room for the new cultural forms we feel might be adequate to this vivifying hubris and doubt, we are willing to accept the destruction of past cherished norms, to endure large measures of disorientation in the present, and to sift through a great deal of dreck.

Abstract art is propelled by this hope and hunger. It reflects the urge to push toward the limit, to colonize the borderland around the opening onto nothingness, where the land has not been settled, where the new can emerge. That is part of what drives modernity: the urge to regenerate ourselves by bathing in the extreme, for better and for worse. What is remarkable is that abstract art, which was initially advanced by its advocates as a culture of crypto-religious, timeless certainties, associated closely with the new monolithic collectivism in society, should have been reinvented and flourished the last fifty years as a paradigmatic example of secular diversity, individual initiative, and private vision. It is a prime case of modern Western society's willingness to vest the fate of its communal culture in the play of independent subjectivities, and to accept the permanent uncertainties, pluralities, and never-ending, irresolvable debate that come with that territory.

STRIP OF THE WEEK

